

Chapter 1

The sunlight shines brightly into my eyes, making me squint. A breeze drifts through the open window, rustling the thin curtains and carrying the scent of salt and seaweed into the room. I groan. I throw a towel over my face and pull the blanket up for extra cover. I don't want to get up. But the distant crash of waves mixes with the squawking of seagulls outside. I bury my head into my pillow, but it doesn't shut out the noise. The sun is too bright, even with my blanket halfway over my head. I roll onto my shoulder and clench the towel covering my face. A tear drips from my eye and rolls down my cheek. And through the watery blur, the shape of an empty table with two bowls lingers in my sight.

With a weak voice, I call out, "Grandma?" But there's no answer.

I choke on my tears, but it's really the stillness that's suffocating. The quiet reminds me of everything I've lost. I look out the window, searching for a memory, but I find nothing. With a sigh, I sit up and wipe the tears from my face. I'm awake.

I get up and walk toward the table, looking at the two bowls set across from each other. There's a spoon and a crumpled napkin in one of the bowls. I eat abalone porridge for dinner every night. But the other bowl is still filled with porridge, and a spoon sits neatly on a cloth napkin. I sit down and stare at the untouched bowl in front of me. It's cold now. There's a thin crust of rice and broth. I reach for the spoon and stir gently, breaking the surface. It feels wrong. I shouldn't be touching Grandma's food, even though she passed away two months ago.

Back then, I didn't appreciate it when Grandma made me dinner. I never noticed the care she put into each meal, the hours spent over the stove, her hands shaking slightly as she stirred the porridge. I complained about how she never put enough salt and how the rice was too mushy, even though I knew how hard she worked for every bowl. I'd always take my first bite and then

push it away, saying I wasn't hungry anymore. Thinking there was something better to do than sit at the table with her.

But now, I make dinner for the two of us. I know Grandma is gone. But setting two bowls feels like keeping her close. It's the one part of the day when I can almost pretend she's still here, just about to sit down with me like always.

The first few nights after she passed, I couldn't eat at all. I couldn't stand the silence. The empty house. Without Grandma's spoon clinking against the bowl. Without the conversations she used to try to force out of me. But then, one evening, I set the table for two. Maybe it was out of habit. Or maybe I couldn't stand how lonely it felt to only set a place for myself. And so I kept doing it. Every night, I'd cook the porridge the way she taught me. I put a spoon and napkin on the table, just like before. Sometimes, I talk to the empty chair. Sometimes I don't. But every time I sat down and took my first bite, I heard her voice in my head.

"Eat slowly," she used to say. "Food tastes better when you take your time."

And so I did. I know I can't bring her back. I know that one day, I might stop setting the second bowl. But for now, this is how I keep her with me. This is how I let myself grieve.

I stand up from the table, breaking away from this memory. I neatly place a napkin over the untouched bowl and put the empty bowl in the sink. I don't want to look at it anymore. I walk out of the small wooden shack I call home and look out at the world that's wide awake.

The island lies in an archipelago just southeast of the mainland. Smaller islands fade into the distance, but the ocean stretches endlessly, melting into the sky. This is where I live, on a small island I've called home all my life. Our house sits outside a creek, where the land slopes toward the beach. In the morning, I walk down the sandy slope where the water crashes against

the shoreline, swelling and frothing as it rushes onto the land. The little bubbles from the sea foam tickle my ankles. The deeper I go, the more the waves roll and pull at my legs.

After wading in the water, I sit on the sand and grab a handful. The grains slip through my fingers, and I let some fall onto my belly. The corner of my lip starts to curl. It's bittersweet. It's a smile born from memories that slip away as soon as they surface. As I continue pouring sand on my stomach, I recall a memory.

Since I was five years old, I've buried myself in the sand. I would dig a hole and layer the sand on top of me, letting it press against my skin. I liked how it felt. Warm and soft. Grandma used to swaddle me in a towel warmed by the fire when I was a newborn. Even now, I can't fall asleep without a towel. I rub the sand on my body to remind myself of that feeling. It makes me feel safe and comfortable. Maybe it was always a way of regressing, a defense mechanism to hide myself from all the unpleasant things in life. I just wanted to feel safe. So, I bury myself deeper. And the deeper I go, the more warmth I feel.

But then I remembered being a child, sitting on the shore, watching Grandma row back through the waves. I always pretended to fall asleep. I used to hear the oars splash the water, catching less of the ocean as it got shallower. The splashing grew louder and louder as the boat neared the shore. I hated that sound. Or maybe I was just annoyed by it. It meant we were going home. It meant I wouldn't feel the warmth of the sand anymore. It meant Grandma was done diving for the day.

Grandma told me it's a tradition for the women to dive for abalones. They called Grandma *haenyeo*—the incredible “woman of the sea.” I used to watch her disappear into the waves, free-diving with just a snorkel. Every few days, she brought back a net full of abalone, selling them at the market for a hefty price. That's how she made a living and cared for me. Like

the ocean, the abalone's shell glistened with blue and turquoise. Its flesh was a soft orange-pink. They looked like something magical, a mermaid's treasure. But to Grandma, they meant food in my stomach, a warm bed to sleep in, a life we could share together.

I remember Grandma would pull the boat onto the sand, lifting a net full of abalones and setting it down carefully. I used to peek from under my towel, watching her rub her back. Every time she came back, she would sigh, "My back hurts so much I want to die." Then she'd look at me, smiling at the sight of me buried under the sand. She adored me.

"Son? You fell asleep again, didn't you? Were you waiting to greet me?" she would ask.

I should have said "Yes."

Instead, I ignored her.

She massaged her back and sighed again. "Son, my back hurts. Can you help me with this?" She pointed at the heavy net.

But I jumped out of the sand and ran toward the ocean. "I want to go swimming!" I ran away when she needed my help. I ran until the water was up to my neck. I wasn't tall back then, but it was deep enough for the ocean to take me.

Grandma shouted, "You're too deep!" Her voice was panicked. "Come here!" she yelled, struggling with her aching back. I splashed salt water into her face. It must have burned her eyes. When I finally ran back to shore, I started burying myself in the sand again. But Grandma grabbed my arm and hit my wrist. I cried while she dried me with a warm towel. I kicked the net full of abalones, and she hit me again.

I used to think she hit me because she hated me. Now I know it was because she loved me. Because she was trying to protect me from making a mistake that could cost me my life.

But, I screamed at her. “I hate you! Grandma, I hate you! You’re not even my mom!” I said that every time she scolded me.

I didn’t mean it. I promise.

I think she knew I was just being a brat. But deep down, I knew it hurt her. Because I never appreciated the things she did. Because I never thanked her for taking me in. Because every time she said “I love you,” I never said it back.

She called me “son.”

I called her “nuisance.”

A gust of wind kicks up, making the sand prickle against my skin. The salty air stings my nose, and I blink up at the sky, realizing how low the sun has gotten. My hands are still half-buried in the sand, warm but damp now.. The memories start to fade.

Chapter 2

Although I would like to sit in the sand and sunbathe like I used to, it’s time to start diving for abalones. I grab a snorkel and a pair of fins from the boat and check if the equipment still works. Luckily, the net doesn’t have any rips or big holes. Everything I have is old, but I don’t have the money to replace it.

After Grandma passed away, I started diving alone. Abalone diving has always been a tradition reserved for women. Girls were taught from a young age how to harvest this delicacy from the ocean for generations. Men fish. Women dive. I know I’m breaking tradition, that people on the island would disapprove if they saw me. But I don’t care. Diving is the only thing that makes sense now. It keeps me close to Grandma, like she’s still here, just ahead of me in the water. Every time I go under, I imagine her swimming beneath me, her net filled with abalone, her hands scraping them from the rocks with ease.

Grandma brought me into the ocean a few times when I turned twelve, but I could never keep up. The ocean was too strong, and my lungs were too weak. I always wanted to swim in the deep parts, to follow her down to the rocks where the abalones hid. But I could barely stay afloat in the choppy water. It took me years to build the lung capacity to dive as deep as she did. Even now, I have to surface so often because I get lightheaded.

While Grandma was diving, I stayed on the boat, playing *gonggi* to pass the time. The boat swayed too much, and the plastic jacks always tumbled off the wooden bench. Eventually, I stopped going out with her altogether. I would hide in the creek until she was already in the water so I could stay on shore and play in the sand instead. But I don't get to hide anymore. I grab the net and sling it over my shoulder. It's empty, but the weight of it feels heavier today.

For the first month, I found success selling abalones in the fish market with a sign saying, PLEASE BUY! GRANDMA IS SICK! I guess my grandma had a lot of returning customers who felt sorry for me. I didn't have the heart to tell them that she passed away. Even now, I try to convince myself she's still here with me. Back then, the customers would buy my whole supply for the day. They made sure I went home with nothing. Some customers would give me envelopes full of money, notes, or fortunes, wishing she would get better soon. Some of her closest customers would give me boxes of oranges and Korean pears.

Eventually, I started throwing away the notes and keeping the money. It was too painful to read them. Looking back, I realize now that so many people loved my grandma. Sure, it was business, but they truly cared for her. They treated her more like family than I did. But she would have died for me. I still don't understand why.

As time passed, her customers started getting worried and even frustrated. They insisted on visiting her in the hospital to see how she was doing. They were afraid she was alone while I was out selling abalones. At least, that's what I told them so I could sell.

It's been a month since I last saw one of Grandma's regular customers come by. Maybe they went somewhere else. Maybe they figured out that Grandma had passed away and that I was putting on an act just to survive. Either way, they're gone now, and I don't blame them. Everyone's compassion has a limit. I've learned not to take anyone for granted. I knew people would stop coming one day. I just wish I'd had a little more time to prepare. But now, all I can do is keep diving, not just to keep myself afloat but to keep my memories of Grandma alive.

I look across the ocean to find a bright orange buoy that bobs on the surface. The waves are roughest by the shore. I fight against the ocean as I push the boat. As the waves break, the water crashes into the front of the boat, slamming it back toward the land. Once the boat is deep enough, I climb inside and start rowing. But the rowing doesn't get easier farther out. The waves still swell beneath the surface, rocking the boat. It takes an incredible amount of strength and endurance to keep myself from falling over while paddling at the same time. As I row into the open water, I think about how my old, frail grandma could travel across the island waters. Now I realize why she was always massaging her back.

After reaching the orange buoy, I lift a rusted anchor off the floor and toss it into the ocean. I feel a thud. The boat is secured. To be extra safe, I tie a rope around the buoy. After putting on a pair of flippers and a snorkel, I grab a net and untangle it.

As I jump into the water, I feel my body tense up. Although the sun warms my skin on the way to the buoy, the water is much colder. My grandma told me to control my breathing. Take slow, big breaths, so I don't get lightheaded. The snorkel helps me draw air into my lungs

and control my breathing. When my breath is calm, I put my head in the water and start to survey the ocean floor, searching for the blue-green shimmer at the bottom. After spotting the rocks where the abalones hide, I take a deep breath, filling my lungs as much as possible. I tuck my head, diving toward the ocean floor. My legs kick the air above the surface, struggling against the weight of my own body until I get just deep enough for the fins to start catching water. I stretch my arms forward, streamlining my body as I descend.

The water around me shifts, its coldness still biting at my skin. It's not a steady cold but one that comes in waves. Swirling currents wrap around my arms and legs. The deeper I go, the stronger the pull of the ocean, tugging me sideways and tilting my path when I try to swim straight down. I adjust, angling my body and kicking harder, but the current pushes back, making every movement feel heavier and slower.

The ocean floor is about ten meters beneath me but feels farther. With every meter, the water presses heavier against my chest, my heartbeat loud in my ears. I exhale small bubbles, watching them slowly ascend, and pinch my nose to blow, equalizing the pressure in my head before it starts to hurt. My ears pop, and the sharp pain fades.

I keep kicking, my muscles burning as I push through the resistance of the water. The weight of the ocean settles over me, now pressing against my ribs, but I keep going, stretching my arms toward the rocky bottom. Schools of small fish dart away as I move, their silver bodies catching the last glimmers of light from above. The stillness down here is almost eerie. The only sound is the distant echo of waves crashing somewhere far above me.

As I reach the bottom, my hands sweep against the rough surface of a rock. I steady myself, making minimal movements to conserve oxygen. My lungs tighten, a reminder that every second down here is borrowed time. I scan the ocean floor, searching for the abalones

clinging to the undersides of rocks. My fingers brush against rough, uneven surfaces, feeling for their smooth shells. The water is darker down here. The sunlight barely reaches through the shifting currents. But then I spot them, a small cluster nestled beneath a pile of jagged rocks.

Carefully, I wedge my fingers beneath an abalone, working to free it without tearing the soft flesh of its belly. It resists, gripping the rock like it knows I'm trying to take it. I steady myself, adjusting my grip, and slowly pry it loose. I drop it into the net, then reach for another, moving as fast yet gently as possible. I grab two before I feel my lungs tighten, screaming for air. I can't stay down any longer.

Pushing off the ocean floor, I kick hard, rushing myself upward. My legs strain as I fight against the weight of the water. The surface feels impossibly far away. The stabbing pain in my body grows unbearable, my body desperate for oxygen.

Then, finally, I break through the surface. I gasp, sucking in the air just as a wave crashes against my face. Saltwater floods my mouth, burning my throat as I cough and sputter, trying to clear it out. My body panics, but I force myself to stay calm, flipping onto my back to float. It's the first thing my grandma ever taught me about swimming. When in trouble, turn over and breathe.

I stare at the sky, the sun glaring down, too bright against the deep blue. I lift an arm to shield my eyes, catching my breath as the waves gently rock me. I know I have to go back down. There are still more abalones clinging to those rocks, and I won't be able to sell much if I don't get them all. It's going to take a while.

I take a few more breaths, steadying myself as I float on my back. My lungs still ache from the last dive, but I don't have a choice. I have to go back down. Turning over, I grip the net tighter and take another deep breath, filling my lungs to the brim before diving again.

The ocean swallows me once more, the cold wrapping around my body like a tight grip. I kick hard, pushing through the shifting currents, aiming for the same patch of rocks where the abalones cling. My body already feels slower, and my muscles cramp. But I force myself to keep going. I reach the bottom and move quickly, prying more abalones off the rock and stuffing them into the net with hurried hands. The pressure in my lungs builds faster this time, my body warning me that I don't have as much air as last time. I grab one last abalone before kicking off the ocean floor, rushing toward the surface again. I gasp, desperate for air, but a wave knocks me back into the water. The waves slap against my face when I resurface, but I barely notice. I cough violently, water pouring out my mouth. I just float for a moment, exhausted, letting the ocean carry me while I catch my breath. It takes until sunset to collect even a small bunch of abalones from the ocean floor.

Although I dry myself as best I can, I row back to shore shivering, the wetness clinging to my skin as the sun sinks below the horizon. When I finally make it back, I drag my aching body onto the sand, grabbing the net full of abalones before trudging home. I pull an ice chest closer inside the kitchen and dump out the day's catch. My stomach folds into itself. Some of the abalones must have fallen from the net because I remember putting twelve inside, but I count only nine in the chest. Even worse, three of them have rips in their flesh from when I pulled them off the rocks too quickly, desperate for air. I put the abalones I can't sell back into the net. It's not nearly enough to buy food or water. I stare at the small pile of abalones, the weight of exhaustion pressing down on me.

If this keeps up, I might have to start begging for money in the fish market. My heart anchors my feet down at the thought. I've seen beggars in the market, sitting on the ground with their hands out, their voices small and desperate. I never thought I'd be one of them. I don't want

to be. My grandma never begged for a day in her life. She worked, fought against the sea, and earned everything she had with her hands. If she were still here, would she be disappointed in me? Heartbroken? Would she think I wasn't trying hard enough? But what else can I do? I have no one left. No safety net, no other way to survive. I tell myself it's just for now, just until I can catch more and sell more. But deep down, I wonder if this is where I start to disappear. If this is where I stop being someone who fights and becomes someone who waits for kindness, that may never come.

Chapter 3

As the sun goes down, I change into dry clothes, though my skin still feels sticky with salt. The cold clings to me, but I don't have time to care. My head is pounding from hunger. I drag myself to the kitchen and dig into the big fifty-pound bag of rice, scooping out what's left. The bottom of the bag feels rough, the last few grains clinging to the fabric like dust. It's almost empty.

Before starting the porridge, I take the net of ruined abalones and dump it onto the counter. I trace my fingers across the deep rips in their flesh where my nails dug in too hard. I sigh in disappointment and grab a knife. The blade presses into the abalone's tough body, and I start slicing, chopping the ruined ones into small, uneven chunks. I can't afford to waste anything, so I force myself to eat my mistake.

I pour the rice into a pot and rinse it with water, swirling my fingers through the grains. The water turns cloudy, and the starch makes it slick between my hands. I dump it out and rinse it again. Grandma used to say you had to do it three times. Any less, and the porridge would taste stale. Any more, and you'd wash away the good parts.

As the pot heats up, the water starts to bubble. The grains soften, breaking apart little by little. A thick, starchy scent rises with the steam, warm and familiar, like something safe. I stir slowly, watching the porridge turn smooth. The bubbles pop lazily at the surface, releasing a light smell that makes my stomach grumble. Even though there's barely enough to feed one person, I still make a second portion for Grandma.

While the porridge thickens, I set the table in the middle of the room. Two spots. Two spoons. Two napkins. I move slower than I need to, lining everything up just right. If I do it carefully enough, Grandma might actually sit down across from me again.

When the porridge is done, I ladle it into two bowls. No salt. Just how Grandma always made it. I sink onto the cushion and stare across the room at the empty space where she should be. I press my hands together and bow my head. The smell of the porridge lingers in the air, thick and warm, curling around me like a memory. I whisper a prayer. Then, I pick up my spoon.

A breeze slips through the window, making the room feel even colder. It chills my fingers and makes my nose run. I pull my sleeves over my hands, but it doesn't help much. We don't have heat this month. I don't have money for it. I get up and gesture toward the empty window.

"You must be cold. I'll shut the window," I say, getting up. "You don't want me getting sick"

As I walk back, the bowl of porridge and the spoon still sit neatly on the table, untouched.

"Not hungry?" I ask.

Silence.

I force a small smile and take a bite of porridge.

"I went diving for abalones today," I say, stirring my spoon through the bowl. "It was hard. Really hard. I was already tired by the time I got to the buoy. You know, the one you told

me not to hang on when you were teaching me how to swim. My back hurt a lot, too. Now I get why you were always rubbing yours.”

I let out a small breath, waiting.

Nothing.

I smile again, but it feels heavier this time. I take another bite.

“The water wasn’t too cold today. And going out there...it felt nice. Like just being in the ocean. And swimming. It clears my head.” I pause, pressing my lips together before I go on. “I didn’t get a lot, though. Just a handful. And some of them were ruined ‘cause I was too rough. I still can’t hold my breath as long as you, even though I’ve been practicing every day.”

I put my spoon down and press my tongue against the roof of my mouth, trying to push down the tight, aching feeling in my chest.

“But at least I got some. At least I tried my best. And you said as long as I tried my best that’s good enough for you.”

There’s no response. I force a smile, but it feels shaky. I take a bite of porridge.

“That’s all you ever asked for, right? I did a good job. You’re proud of me.”

Silence.

A tear slips down my cheek. I set the spoon carefully on top of the napkin, my hands trembling.

“You’re happy you raised me. No matter how much I messed up, you still loved me. I’m your son. Grandma... You still love me, don’t you? I made you happy.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and press my hands against my face to hide the embarrassment. I feel stupid. I’m talking to someone who’s never coming back. I start to cry.

The sobs shake me, and before I can stop myself, I slam both hands on the table.

“Why?!” My voice cracks. “Why won’t you say anything to me? Why won’t you tell me I did a good job? Do you love me?” My breath stutters. “You do love me... don’t you? So why? Why can’t you just talk to me?”

I suck in a sharp breath, gripping the edge of the table.

“Do you even think about me? Do you even know I’m sitting here with you? Do you hate me?” The words rush out, breaking apart between sobs. “I just want an answer! Please! Tell me! Tell me anything! Tell me I’m a spoiled brat! Tell me you regret raising me! Even if you say you hate me, at least it’s something! Just... please. Please... say something!”

I rush into the kitchen, yank open a drawer, and grab a knife. My hands are shaking as I press the blade against my neck. The metal is cold. My breath comes fast and uneven. “Is this what you want?” My voice wavers. “Should I join you? Here? Now?”

My fingers tighten around the handle. The tears have stopped. My hands aren’t shaking anymore. The dull pain from slamming the table lingers in my fingers.

“Yeah...” My voice is barely above a whisper. “If I die right now, I can see you again. I won’t have to wake up and feel like this. Maybe I’ll be happier.”

I press the knife a little harder. The edge digs in, not deep, just enough to feel the burning pain. My pulse hammers against the blade. I shift it, sliding the point under my jaw, and in one sharp motion, I swipe forward.

A searing pain spreads across my skin. The knife clatters to the floor. My breath stutters as I press trembling fingers to my neck. It’s warm. The smell of iron fills my nose.

“No... no, no, no. This isn’t...” My chest tightens, and I suck in a sharp breath. “This isn’t what you want.” My voice breaks. “You told me...to live... to live a long, healthy life.”

I press a napkin to the cut, holding it until the bleeding slows. My vision blurs, but I wipe my face roughly with my sleeve.

I glance at the empty seat across the table. The bowl of porridge sits there untouched, and the spoon still rests neatly on the napkin.

“I...” My voice cracks, barely making it past my lips. “I’m sorry, Grandma. I... I didn’t mean to...”

The words crumble into sobs. I drop my head into my hands, shoulders shaking, breath coming in gasps.

The room is silent.

I swallow hard, wiping my face with shaking hands. I look at the empty seat again.

“I’m going to be fine. Right, Grandma?”

There’s no answer.

I try to lift the spoon to my mouth, but my hand shakes. The tears start again, spilling down my face before I can even bring it close. I choke on the sobs, the weight of everything crashing down. The spoon trembles in my grip, and I drop it, watching it clatter to the floor. I try to breathe, but I choke on my breath. I hang my head down, my face buried in my hands. I don’t know what to do anymore. I can’t even eat.

“I just want you to talk to me...” The words fall out in a broken whisper, barely more than a sob.

*****Chapter 4*****

After dinner, I take the dishes to the sink. My hands are still shaky. I breathe deeply, trying to steady myself as I run warm water over the bowls. The sound of it rushing down the

drain helps quiet my thoughts. I scrub slowly, focusing on each movement. Soap. Rinse. Dry. Just something to do. Something to keep my hands busy.

I wrap the leftover porridge in plastic and place it on the counter for tomorrow. My eyes sting, and my throat feels raw from crying, but the worst of it has passed. I wipe my face with my sleeve and take a slow breath. I glance out the window. The sky is dark and heavy with clouds. No stars tonight. No moonlight, either. Just thick gray stretching over the sky. The air feels dense.

I step toward the doorway, reaching for my sandals, but stop. It's cold. Grandma wouldn't want me getting sick. I sigh and turn back, grabbing a jacket and pulling on a thick pair of socks. As I head for the door again, my eyes land on the box under my bed. I crouch down and pull it out. It's a pair of hiking shoes my Grandma bought me for my fourteenth birthday. When I take the shoes out of the box, I see a folded receipt with shaky handwriting on the back. It reads: "My son, Happy Birthday!" I run my fingers over the laces, hesitating. Then, slowly, I hold them to my nose and inhale deeply, capturing the scent and bringing forth another memory.

I remember when I first started going on these walks to the creek with Grandma. She got so excited that we went to buy shoes and clothes with what little money we had. We took a boat and a train to the city, far into the mainland. It was my first time there. I had only heard about city life from the chefs who worked in fancy restaurants and bought Grandma's abalones. I don't remember how long the trip took since I slept through most of it.

When we arrived, I immediately noticed how different we looked from everyone else. Our skin was darker, weathered by the sun and salt, and our clothes felt plain compared to the polished outfits around us. The people there moved with purpose, their arms full of shopping

bags, their faces sharp with focus. Meanwhile, my grandma and I hesitated, unsure where to go first.

Eventually, we found a hiking shop filled with rows of sturdy shoes and thick coats. My grandma called a sales associate to help me find shoes. The sales associate pulled out nine boxes—three different models and three different sizes each. I knew this was going to take a while. For every pair, my grandma made me put on both shoes and walk a lap around the store. With each lap, my embarrassment grew. By the time she handed me the last box, my patience snapped.

“Why do I need to try on this pair?” I yelled. “I already told you the first one was fine! You’d think a fourteen-year-old would know his own shoe size!”

I grabbed the box with the first pair and shoved it into the sales associate’s arms. “Just take this. She can pay for it or not,” I muttered before storming out of the store.

I expected my grandma to be angry. Instead, she looked sorry. She folded her hands together and bowed her head to the sales associate. I heard her whisper, “I’m sorry for his behavior. I’ll raise him better.”

But you did. It was all my fault. All of it was my fault. You did the best you could. I’m so sorry, Grandma. I should have been a better son.

Neither of us spoke on the way home. My grandma clutched the plastic bag with my shoes inside, staring at it like it held something fragile. I stared out the window, watching the land blur past. When we returned to the island, I went straight to the creek where we always walked at night. I wanted to be alone. I wanted nothing to do with her.

“Where are you going?” Grandma asked quietly.

I kept walking. I didn’t answer.

I take out the wad of paper stuffed inside the shoe and untie the laces. I shove my feet inside and tie the laces into a knot. They still fit perfectly and are comfortable. I take a flashlight and into my pocket, open the door, and look at the night sky. The air smells damp like rain is coming. I step outside, my shoes crunching against the dirt. I want to take a walk to quiet my thoughts, but with every step, I think about how I repaid Grandma for spending what little money we had to buy these shoes for me. I repaid her by yelling. By embarrassing her. By ignoring her the whole way home. I squeeze my eyes shut and take a deep breath. I want to tell her I'm sorry. I should've held her hand on the train ride back instead of staring out the window like she wasn't even there. I swallow hard and step forward. The wind picks up, sending a chill through my jacket. The creek isn't far, but it feels like a long way to go tonight.

I keep walking, following the path that leads into the clearing by the creek. It's darker than usual. The thick clouds bury the moonlight, and the air feels heavier like the sky is waiting to break open. The wind pushes through the trees, making the branches creak. As I step into the clearing, I glance up, hoping for stars. But there's nothing. Just a blanket of gray stretching endlessly. The clouds churn, thick and unmoving, smothering any light that might try to shine through. I exhale, my breath coming out shaky. I see my heart in the sky.

I rub my fingers over the cut on my jaw, the sting grounding me for a second. Why did I ever think that way? I don't want to be swallowed up by this feeling, but it clings to me. I wish I could see something beautiful. Something that would remind me there's more than just this emptiness, this regret. But tonight, the sky doesn't give me that.

I keep moving, stepping out of the clearing and heading toward the creek. The sound of running water grows louder, cutting through the silence of the night. I stop at the edge, crouching and dipping my fingers into the water. It's cold, but I don't pull away. I sit on the damp ground,

letting the creek rush past me. Then, something sticky lands on my hand. I flinch, reaching for my flashlight. Shining it down, I see a blue frog clinging to my finger. I lift my hand, watching as the tiny creature adjusts its grip, unbothered by me. Grandma told me a story about the blue frogs when I walked off into the creek after we got home from the city.

After we came home from the city, I remember playing with clay I found in the creek bed when I walked off. I sat by the water, pressing the clay between my fingers, shaping it into little figures only to crush them again. I heard footsteps crunching against the damp ground behind me. Slow, careful steps. I didn't turn around. I already knew it was Grandma.

She didn't say anything at first. She just stood there, probably watching me the way she always did. Worried but patient, waiting for me to speak first. But I didn't. I just kept staring at the creek, at the water flowing at my feet.

Then, finally, she cleared her throat. I heard the rustling of a plastic bag.

"My son?" she said, her voice uncertain, like she was afraid I might run again. "Come here for a second."

I glanced up. Grandma stood a few steps away, clutching the shoebox to her chest, the plastic bag crinkling in the gentle breeze.

She hesitated before speaking again. "Why don't you put them on? I bought these because it's your birthday."

I stared at the box in her hands. I didn't want to move. I had tried them on in the store. Still, I stayed where I was, waiting.

"Please?" she asked.

I sighed, wiping my hands on my pants. I nodded and set the box down on a dry patch of grass. My hands were clumsy as I pulled off the soggy cardboard lid and took out the shoes,

untying the laces with stiff fingers. I shoved my feet inside and tugged the laces tight, tying them into a knot.

Grandma took a small step closer. "Happy Birthday," she said. "They look good on you."

I kept my head down, staring at my feet. "I'm sorry," I mumbled. The words came out shaky, but I meant them. "For before. For... being like that at the store."

Grandma was quiet for a moment. Then, she let out a small sigh, the kind that wasn't tired or frustrated. It was just soft like she had been holding something in.

She knelt beside me, her knees pressing into the damp earth. "I know it's hard right now," she said, her voice steady but warm. "But I hope that you'll see how much I love you one day."

I swallowed, squeezing my fingers in the palm of my hand. I didn't know what to say.

She reached out, hesitated momentarily, then placed a gentle hand on the small of my back. "One day, we'll have something beautiful, you and me. I know it."

Her words sat heavy, too much for me to understand then. So I just nodded, keeping my eyes on the water. And then we heard a frog croaking delicately. Grandma shifted slightly. "You remember the story about the blue frogs, don't you?" she asked.

I stayed silent. I heard this story before.

Grandma sat beside me. And with her soft, thoughtful storytelling voice, she began, "There were once two blue frogs. A mommy frog and A boy frog. The boy frog never listened to a word the mommy frog said. If she told him to go up, he went down. If she told him to go left, he went right.

But one day, the mommy frog became very sick, and she knew she was going to die. So, she asked her son to bury her by the riverbank when she passed away, hoping that, true to form, the boy frog would do the opposite and bury her in the mountain.

When the mommy frog finally died, the boy frog was overcome with grief. But in the end, he chose to honor her last wish. He buried her by the riverbank, just as she had asked. And so, every time it rains, the boy frog cries because the rain washes away the grave he made for her.”

I let out a slow breath. “A frog can’t dig a grave without hands.”

Then Grandma laughed, her voice rising above the rustling leaves. I looked away, hiding a smile. She reached over and gently brushed my hair to the side. “When I die, will you bury me somewhere special?”

“Sure,” I said, turning away from her hand.

Grandma kissed me on the cheek. I fell asleep on her shoulder.

A single drop of rain splatters against my skin. The memory fades, and the present creeps with the heavy fog. Suddenly, the rain falls fast, soaking everything, turning the world gray and blurry. The frogs don’t croak like they did that day. They cry, filling the night with regret. Their cries echo through the storm like they’re mourning, too. The despair pours out of me as quickly as the rain while I chase the memory of Grandma sitting beside me in the creek. I don’t try to stop it. I let the tears fall, mixing with the rain, until I can’t tell where the two end and begin.

I should’ve told her I was thankful. That I appreciated her. That I loved her. But I never did. Even when I had the chance that night. Here I am, sitting in the creek, alone. Does she see the mistake I’m trying to fix? Does she know how much I love her? The rain falls harder, but I don’t want to leave. At least the frogs are here to cry with me.

I remember thinking that the moment we shared, when she forgave me, was a turning point. It was a time when I thought things between us were finally getting better.

But Grandma died suddenly, the day after my fourteenth birthday.

Grandma went to the ocean one morning to catch abalones. I stayed behind, wanting to try out my new shoes, so I went hiking in the creek. Later, I came back to the house and found her lying on the floor without a sleeping pad. I thought it was strange. I knew something was wrong. I tried to wake Grandma up, but she wouldn't move. I panicked, carried her to my bed, shook her, but nothing. I called for help. But, by the time someone arrived, it was too late. The doctors said she overworked herself. I curl myself into a tight ball, burying my face in my knees. "I can't forgive myself. I don't deserve a family."

*****Chapter 5*****

Early in the morning before the sun is up, I wake up and prepare to go to the market to sell the abalones I caught yesterday. I make sure to put on my best clothes and clean myself up as best as I can. I load up the wooden boat with the ice chest only half full of abalones and make sure I have everything I need before going to the other island. It takes an hour to row across the ocean to get to the market, where all the fishermen in the archipelago go to sell their catch. Pulling up to the shore, I tie the boat to a post on the beach and take a towel out of my bag to dry the sweat off my face. I comb my hair one more time before I go into the market. Appearance is everything, my grandma always told me.

The fish market is swarming with people. I can see the fishermen arranging their catch on the ice beds, trying to keep everything fresh while negotiating prices with customers. People from all walks of life crowd the market. I've seen chefs from high-end restaurants in the city out here picking up the freshest fish for their menus while some beggars take what's already starting to spoil. It's common to see people buy fish and cook it outside the market for lunch, the smell of sizzling fish filling the air.

I row onto the shore just after sunrise. The market is busiest by then, but at least the catch is still fresh. I quickly scan the crowd, looking for any open spaces. The earlier I get here, the better my chance of finding a decent place to set up. Usually, there's an open spot towards the back, but today it's incredibly crowded. I lug the heavy ice chest around, taking a few breaks as my arms ache, until I see an empty corner behind a pile of crates. It's near the trash where the other fishermen toss their scraps after cleaning their fish, and the stench is awful. But it's the only place left.

I settle there, my feet sinking a little in the damp ground. I pop open the ice chest and carefully arrange the abalones, making sure they look as neat as possible. I place a cardboard sign that reads: FRESH ABALONE! HAND-CAUGHT! Then, I look out across the market, hoping someone will notice. But as I glance around, I feel the weight of the other fishermen's glares. They whisper to each other, eyeing me with suspicion. They're watching me closely, probably judging the kid who is too young and too ill-mannered to know that diving for abalones is a tradition, specifically for women, not men.

As the market fills with more people, I try desperately to sell my few abalones. I call out to anyone passing by, hoping to catch their attention. "Fresh abalone!" I shout. "Almost sold out! Get them while you can!" But no one stops. They know I'm lying. They saw how little I had when I set up earlier. And if people here wanted abalones, they'd buy it from the *haenyeo* divers. That's how it's always been. A boy like me selling abalone goes against tradition, and no one likes seeing someone disrespecting culture, especially not like this.

After hours of sitting here, my voice hoarse from calling out, I start to lose hope. Hardly anyone has even glanced at my abalones. I look down and see the ice melting fast. If I don't sell

them soon, the water will turn warm, and no one will want them. I don't have enough money to buy more ice, so I can do only one thing.

I push myself up and walk over to the other fishermen, keeping my head low. I know they don't want me here, but I'm desperate. Even if they hate me, maybe, just maybe, someone will help.

I walk over and try to catch the eye of the fisherman across from me. When he finally looks up, I give him a small wave.

"Excuse me?"

He immediately looks back down, ignoring me.

I swallow and try again. "Excuse me?"

With an irritated sigh, he finally responds. "What?"

"I was wondering if you could spare some ice. Just a little to keep my abalone fresh."

He scoffs. "It's gonna cost you."

"I... I don't have any money," I admit. "But if you could just lend me a little..."

"No money?" He curls his lip in disgust. "Then get lost."

I lower my head. "Sorry for bothering you."

I look around to see if other fishermen will lend me ice. But, after my interaction, I can tell they all want nothing to do with the dishonorable orphan.

When Grandma brought me to the fish market, everyone adored me. They ruffled my hair, slipped extra fish into our basket, and told me I was lucky to have a grandmother like her. Back then, I never understood why they treated us so kindly. I thought it was just the way things were. But the people here are different now. Their eyes don't hold warmth when they look at me. No one calls my name or waves me over. I am just another unwanted body taking up space,

someone who shouldn't be here. I should've helped Grandma more. If she were here, maybe she could help me now. Maybe I wouldn't be alone.

I return to my stall to check if all the ice has melted. At this point, I might as well head home and see if I can still preserve the abalone somehow. Or eat them for dinner. Someone taps my shoulder as I take down the sign and close the ice chest.

"Excuse me? Are those for sale?"

I turn around to see a well-dressed man standing behind me. He looks like a successful restaurateur or a chef from the city. I can't help but wonder why someone like him would want abalone that's barely fresh. Other stalls are selling better ones, properly stored and well-maintained. But this is the chance I've been waiting for.

I force a smile. "Yes, of course. We're almost sold out, but these are just as fresh as the ones that were already bought."

He smiles back. "Perfect! Looks like you have about a pound left. How much?"

"They're normally fifty thousand won per pound, but since I'm just trying to sell these quickly, I can cut it down to twenty-five thousand for you."

The man pulls out his wallet and takes out a fifty-thousand-won bill. "No, no. I'll pay the full price."

As he hands me the bill, I hesitate. "Are you sure?"

He nods, placing the folded bill firmly in my hand. "Yes, I'm sure. Take it."

I bow my head deeply. "Thank you so much!"

Then he reaches inside his coat and pulls out an envelope, handing it to me. "This is for you as well."

The envelope is heavy. I don't know what's inside. My fingers tighten around it. "For me? Or did you know my grandma?"

"No, no, this is for you," the man says, walking away. I just stand there, watching him go.

I flip the envelope back and forth, trying to see if anyone signed it. But it's just a blank white envelope full of something. I don't want the man to see me opening the envelope in front of him, so I start packing up to go home. I have nothing left to sell.

I row back home, the steady rhythm of the oars cutting through the water as I try to shake off the exhaustion of the day. The boat feels lighter than usual, almost like it's gliding across the water, eager to reach shore. The envelope inside my pocket is all I can think about. I don't say anything as I row, my eyes fixed on the shore ahead. The sound of the waves slapping against the boat's sides is the only thing filling the quiet.

When I finally reach the shore, I tie up the boat and make my way home. The scent of fish guts still lingers in my clothes, so I quickly change out of them, the damp fabric sticking to my skin. Once in fresh clothes, I sit on my bed and pull the envelope from my bag. Its weight feels different now, something more than just paper. I hesitate for a moment before tearing it open.

Inside, there's a piece of paper wrapped around something. It feels like money. I unwrap the paper, revealing a stack of fifty-thousand-won bills. Disbelief hits me like a wave. How much is in here? Half a million? One million? I start counting the bills. It's one million and two hundred fifty thousand won. I stand up, pacing around my room as I count the bills over and over again. I won't have to beg for anything anymore. I won't have to worry about where my next meal will come from. This money will last me for years.

I drop to my knees, holding the stack of bills in my hands. “Grandma, this must be you, right? You’re watching over me?” I want to believe it’s her, somehow, guiding me. Maybe it’s not just luck, but her love, still finding a way to take care of me, even now.

There’s a letter tucked inside the envelope as well. I want to know what it says, maybe find out why that man gave me all this money. Either way, I should go back to the market and thank him. I unfold the letter, but something catches my throat as I read the first words. My hands begin to shake.

To My Beautiful Baby Boy,

I’m not too sure how to start this letter. I don’t think there’s an easy way to do this. I’m struggling to find the words to express the sorrow that I feel right now. I don’t think there are any words strong enough to express the depth of my guilt for leaving you. I have carried the weight of my absence every single day. It’s my biggest regret. It’s a pain I will never escape. I’m your mother, and I abandoned you. You didn’t deserve this. You deserve a mother who stays with you, who protects you, and loves you. You deserve a mother who cherishes you. Someone who never lets you question your worth. Someone who tells you that you are enough. But, instead, I left, causing wounds that I will never fully mend. For that, I am truly, deeply sorry.

I know that leaving you must have felt like a betrayal. I know you have so many questions about why you didn’t grow up with a mother. I can only imagine the confusion, the hurt, and the anger you’ve felt because of me. But, please know that it was never about you. It was never because you weren’t enough or that you weren’t loved. The truth is when I birthed you, I didn’t know what to do. I was lost, drowning in my own pain and fears. I hated myself, and I convinced myself that you would be better off without me. It’s a mistake that still haunts me to this day.

Not a day has passed that I haven’t thought of you. I wonder how you are, what kind of person you’ve become. I wonder if you found happiness despite the hole in your heart I left. When I think about you, I wish I could turn back time and make different choices. I wish I could’ve been there for you, loved you, and raised you. I think of all the memories that we could’ve had with each other, the life we could’ve had with just the two of us. But now, all I have is the hope that you might allow me the chance to make amends. I don’t expect your forgiveness. I don’t feel I deserve it either. But if you ever find it in your heart to let me be a part of your life, in any way that you are comfortable with, until the day I die, I’ll prove to you that I will never walk away again, and I’ll never let you go.

No matter how much time has passed, no matter what I’ve done in the past, or what you think of me now, please know that I have always loved you. I should have never abandoned my beautiful baby boy. And I will always, always be your mother.

With all that I am,

Your mother

I stare at the letter, the word “Mother” staring back at me. I rip the letter into pieces, my hands trembling. No way. This is a mistake. A joke. I gather the torn bits of paper, walk out of the house, and look toward the ocean. The thought that my mother could be out there lingers, but I force it away. I don’t need answers. I don’t need this. So, I throw the shredded paper into the water. The pieces float, drifting farther and farther away, swallowed by the sea. I watch the pieces of the letter disappear in the waves, but doubt creeps in. What if? What if there’s something I’m not seeing? Something I don’t want to see? I grab my hair and shake my head, trying to clear the thought away. No. She’s not out there. There’s no way. But the question still whispers to me. *What if?* Maybe. Just maybe. She could be.

I run into the ocean, chasing after pieces of the letter. It’s a chance, maybe the only chance, to find meaning, to grasp onto something that could change this life. But I’ve already torn it apart. The shreds of paper drift farther with every wave, slipping away like everything always does. I wade deeper, hands sinking into the water, searching. My breath is unsteady. Then, I see soaked pieces of paper floating past. I lunge for it, fingers closing around the fragile scraps. I hold them to the sun and watch the water drip from its edges. The ink is blurry, the words washed away by the sea. I rush back to the shore, desperate. I bury the papers in sand, rubbing it between my palms, trying to dry it. Maybe something will appear. A sentence. A word. Anything. But the note shrivels, breaking apart even more under the grit. I dust off what’s left, but it’s useless. What am I even doing? Why am I so desperate? *It’s just a letter.*

I sit on the shore, staring at the ruined scraps of paper in my hands, the words erased like they were never meant for me in the first place. My fingers tighten around the damp edges, but there’s nothing left to hold on to. Nothing left to save. This feeling. It’s familiar. It’s the same

way I felt when I sat beside Grandma, gripping her hand, whispering for her to wake up. Begging her to stay. But no matter how tightly I held on, she still slipped away.

And yet, here I am, still reaching.

A wave crashes over my legs, soaking the torn paper in my lap. I don't move. Maybe desperation is just another way of lying to myself, telling myself that if I try hard enough, I can change the unchangeable. I loosen my grip. The wind takes the last brittle scrap from my fingers. I try to grab it, but it lands far in the ocean. I close my eyes, breathing in the salt air. I don't know if I'm ready to stop reaching. I don't know if I want to learn how to let go.

*****Chapter 6*****

I don't sleep. Instead, I wait for the sun to rise before heading to the fish market to find the man who gave me the envelope. I'm going to give the money back to him. Instead of preparing the ice chest and making sure I look presentable, I push the boat into the water and jump in. I start rowing toward the fish market with the envelope in my pocket.

As I row across the ocean, I rehearse what I'm going to say to the man if I find him. I want to be polite, like Grandma always told me.

“Hello, mister! Uh... you gave me that letter the other day, and I think... you... um.... you gave it to the wrong person. I don't have a mother. Never did. I was raised by Grandma, and... and I don't know, but this money is for someone else. I don't need it, I mean, I... I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this, so... I just wanted to give it back to you. Yeah, that's it. Um, I hope you, uh, understand.”

I stop, frustrated, and let out a breath. It doesn't make sense.

“Excuse me, mister. You gave me a letter, and I think you made a mistake. I don’t have a mother. I was raised by my grandma, so... this letter isn’t for me. Here's the letter back.” My voice feels too stiff. And I ripped up the letter. I'm giving the money back.

“Good afternoon, mister. You gave me a letter the other day, but I think it was meant for someone else. I don’t have a mother. I was raised by my grandmother, and there’s money in here that I don’t need. I just wanted to give it back to you. The person you meant to give it to probably needs it more than me.”

As I prepare my speeches in my head, the island with the fish market comes closer and closer. When I arrive, I tie the boat to a post and walk into the market, clutching the envelope in my pocket. I notice some fishermen look at me, probably because I’m not selling anything. I’m not lugging the big ice chest around trying to find a spot. They seem relieved like they think I’ve finally gotten the hint that I’m not wanted here, that I’m a disgrace, that I don’t belong. But I ignore them and keep pacing the aisles, looking for the man who gave me the letter.

I remember he was well-dressed and fairly old, but no matter how hard I try, I can’t remember his face clearly. So, I ask random vendors if they’ve seen a man come by giving out money. They look at me like I’m crazy—who just gives out money, especially in a place like this, where some people are struggling just to get by? I spend most of the day walking the aisles, searching for him, but I don’t think I’m going to find him today.

Still, I wonder why someone would send just one letter and not follow up with more. I tell myself there will be other chances. If the man finds me again, I can give him the speech I’ve rehearsed in my head.

As I continue pacing around the fish market, I wonder what I should’ve done when I first saw the man. I should’ve asked more questions about the letter, whether he knows me or if

there's something more to this whole thing. So many unknowns and so many possibilities. Should I have opened the letter in front of him? If I had read it and discovered he had a connection to my mother, I could've asked him about her. I could've learned more about who I am. Maybe I could've gotten some kind of closure.

But do I even want to know my mother? Being here, searching for this man, makes me think maybe I do. Does she know that Grandma passed away? Does she know Grandma raised me for the past fourteen years? If she really did abandon me, why did she leave me with Grandma? Why not reach out sooner? If she knew where I was now, why didn't she find me herself instead of sending a letter?

I've got so many questions. The man might've had answers to all of them. If only I'd opened the letter in front of him. But I didn't.

The sun is setting, and the market is closing down. The entire day has passed, and I still haven't seen the man. My legs are sore, and blisters are forming on the bottoms of my feet from wearing sandals. The fishermen at the market have sold their catch for the day and are packing up, preparing for another early morning out at sea. The market empties more and more with each passing minute. It's no use. The man isn't coming back.

I wonder if it was even worth my time to come back here and search for him again. But I can't have a clear conscience with the money I have. Maybe I could just hide it somewhere and keep diving for abalone, selling them at the market. Or maybe I could give it to some of the fishermen, hoping it might stop them from hating me. I lazily untie the rope from the post and push the boat. I don't know what I'm going to do.

When the tide reaches past my knees, I feel a tap on my shoulder. A familiar voice calls out to me. I freeze. "Hey, young man!"

I slowly turn around and see the same well-dressed man from yesterday.

“Hello again! Did you read the letter?” he asks.

I nod.

“Great! Your mother wants to send you another letter. She told me I could find you here at the fish market. There’s a little something extra for you too.” He hands me a plain white envelope.

My hands start to shake. My ears ring, muffling the sounds around me. But I have to remember to be polite. I don’t want him to judge Grandma.

I bow my head. “Good morn—afternoon. Thank you, but I can’t take the money. There are people who need it more than I do.”

I raise my head slightly and see the man watching me, confused.

I pull the first envelope from my pocket, smoothing out the creases as best I can. Holding it with both hands, I extend it toward him. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have a mother. My grandmother takes care of me.”

But the man doesn’t move. He looks at me, not angry, not impatient, just... concerned. There’s something close to pity in his eyes. Instead of taking the envelope, he gently lowers my hands, keeping his own envelope pressed into my grip.

“You are Hong Ha-Neul, right? You’re fourteen?”

Goosebumps rise along my arms. A strange cold tingles at my back.

“That is my name, yes,” I say carefully, inching my hands forward again. “But someone else might have the same name as me. Grandma is taking care of me. We’re doing well.”

The man tilts his head. “Your mother told me your grandmother passed away.”

My breath stumbles. Without thinking, I grab his shirt with one hand and shove the envelope against his chest. “How do you know that?” My voice shakes.

The man stays still, his expression unreadable. Then he places a firm but gentle hand on my shoulder.

I let go of his shirt. “I’m sorry. Grandma raised me better.” I bow my head again. “Please, listen to me. I don’t want anything to do with you or my mother. Grandma might be gone, but she’s still taking care of me. I don’t need the money. I’m doing just fine.”

The man exhales slowly. “Your mother told me. She said you were probably very lonely living on the island. She cares about you. You have someone who loves you and wants to be part of your life.”

A tear slips down my cheek. I clench my jaw. “Love me? Cares about me? What about Grandma? The one who actually raised me? So she knows Grandma passed away, but she doesn’t even come to see us? If she really cares, where has she been? Why didn’t she visit us?”

My legs give out, and I drop to my knees, covering my face.

The man crouches beside me, resting a hand on my back. “What happened to your grandmother?”

“She was old. She wasn’t well. I couldn’t help her.”

The man stays quiet for a moment before speaking softly. “It’s complicated, but your mother always told me she made a mistake giving you away. She regrets it. That’s why she’s trying to reach you now.” He nudges my hands, urging me to uncover my face. “If you want to understand her, if you want to know why she left, read her letters. Someday, you’ll have a chance to meet her. She just needs time to overcome her guilt. Just like you do.” His voice is steady. “And when that time comes, I hope you can forgive her.”

He extends the letter toward me, watching me carefully.

My hand hovers over it, hesitating. My fingers curl around the envelope. I can feel the weight of the money inside, but more than that, I know there's another letter. Slowly, I take the envelope. The man releases it into my grip.

He smiles, nodding. "I hope things work out between you and your mother. You both need family."

He helps me to my feet and turns to leave.

I bow. "Wait," I call out. "What... Could you tell me your name?"

He pauses. "Young-Hee," he says, pronouncing the syllables carefully. "But you can just call me Pastor."

As I look up, I see the man smile once more before disappearing around the corner of the market. I slip the envelope into my pocket and push my boat into the ocean.

*****Chapter 7*****

I cry the whole way back to the island. Not because I'm angry or sad but because I feel empty. My mother wants to reconnect with me. So, I'm just supposed to accept that another person suddenly wants to be part of my life? I can't do that.

I pull the boat onto shore, tie the rope to the post, and walk home.

At the doorway, I kick off my shoes and stare at the empty living room. My eyes settle on the wooden floor, the same spot where I found Grandma unconscious that day. I step forward and kneel, sweeping my hand across the floor as if I can capture a memory. As if I can trace the imprint of Grandma's body after all those years of lying there. But I feel nothing.

I drag the dinner table from the corner of the room to the center and place two pillows on either side. Then, I go into the kitchen and boil a pot with water. As the water heats, I change into

fresh clothes and sit on my bed, turning the envelope over in my hands. My fingers trace the edges, smoothing the wrinkles from being in my pocket. Like the last one, it's blank. I know there's money inside, more money than I could ever make, even if I worked for the rest of my life. But there's also another letter.

I toss the envelope onto the bed and head to the kitchen to make dinner, hoping to take my mind off it.

As I reach for the rice bag to scoop out two portions, I notice how light it feels. I tilt it and pour the remaining rice into the bowl. It's nearly empty, not enough for two full portions. My stomach aches, hunger making me weak and dizzy. My eyes flick to the envelope on the bed. With the money inside, and the money in the shoebox under my bed, I could feed myself for a long time. But it's too late to go back to the market. I pour what's left of the rice into a bowl and rinse it under running water, my hands trembling.

I dump the rice into the boiling pot, then walk straight to my bed. I rip open the envelope and slide out the money, unfolding the letter wrapped around it. The amount is the same as yesterday.

When the porridge is done, I scoop a full portion into one bowl and a half portion into another. I set them both on the table with a spoon and napkin for each. I sit down in front of the full portion, but I can feel the letter behind me, pressing on my thoughts. Instead of switching the bowls, I stand up and sit in front of the half portion instead. It feels right.

I would have given Grandma the bigger portion anyway.

It reminds me of how she used to give up her own meals so I could eat. I want to make the same sacrifices she did. But as I try to talk to her, I can't get the words out. My mind is too

cluttered. Confused. Overwhelmed. I don't want to talk about Pastor or the letter, but it's all I can think about.

Finally, I stand up. I grab plastic wrap and a cloth from the kitchen, covering each bowl before stacking them together and wrapping them tightly. I shove the letter into my pocket.

I need to visit Grandma's grave. I need her guidance.

I grab a flashlight, put on my jacket, and lace up the hiking shoes Grandma gave me for my birthday. Then, I step outside and head into the night.

I start from the same trailhead that Grandma and I used to walk into the creek. But instead of following the familiar path down to the water, I walk past it, heading toward the mountainside. I don't usually visit Grandma's grave at night. The higher I climb, the colder it gets. But I had to bury her here. Not by the creek. Not where the blue frogs cry. I buried her on the mountainside, just like she told me to in her stories.

See, Grandma? I listen. I'm still listening. I promise. I'll find every lesson in every story you ever told me.

Grandma, I'm listening.

I continue walking up the hill, spiraling up the mountain with the lantern in my hand. It's a long and steep walk. The air grows bitterly cold. My nose and ears go completely numb, and I start to shiver as the breeze picks up. The hunger pains return, sharp and hollow, but I keep going. I can see the buds of the plum blossoms hanging from the trees. I know I'm getting closer to the cliff where Grandma is buried, so I push forward.

Once I reach the part of the mountain dense with trees, I make my way toward the cliff. In the flashlight's glow, I spot a flat clearing with nothing around it. I shine the light toward the ground and find her stone plate. Kneeling in front of the grave, I trace my fingers along the

letters etched into it—her name, her birthday, the day she passed away. A framed portrait of her sits on a wooden easel that always topples over. I stand it upright and place it in front of one of the bowls of porridge, along with a napkin and spoon. I untie the cloth holding the bowls and set them side by side. Then, I use the cloth to wipe the dust from her grave. The plum blossoms I left last time have shriveled up. I unwrap the plastic from my bowl. Before eating, I bow my head toward Grandma's portrait.

“Thank you for my dinner,” I say softly.

I shove spoonfuls of porridge into my mouth, barely chewing before swallowing. It's cold, thick, and sticks to the roof of my mouth, but I don't care. My hands shake as I scoop more, some of it spilling over the edge of the spoon and dripping onto my lap. I eat too fast, barely taking a breath between bites, like I'm afraid someone might take it away from me. But even when the bowl is empty, I'm still hungry. I glance at Grandma's portion, but I'm not going to eat it. After finishing my dinner, I lean back on my hands and look up. As the stars shine, they brighten and dim like little heartbeats in the glassy sky. I can see each little light in a specific way as if someone carefully places each one to create the perfect picture that the eyes can see. I take the portrait of Grandma and face it towards the sky.

“The stars are beautiful here, right, Grandma?” I turn the portrait around to see her face, looking at every detail I can capture with the light from the flashlight.

“How old were you in this picture?” I run my fingers across the glass.

“Do you want to sit next to me, Grandma?” I take the stand out from the easel and carefully place the portrait on it. “Can you still see the stars?”

I take the folded letter from my pocket and press it into my chest. “Grandma, I got this letter from a pastor I met at the fish market. His name is Young-Hee. He also gave me a lot of money. It’s enough to take care of me for a really long time. But inside this envelope, there’s also a letter. It says it’s from my mom. But I never met my mom. Why did you never talk about her? I knew something was missing when I called you Grandma instead of Mom. That’s why I told you you weren’t my mother when you scolded me. But you know that’s not true, right? That’s not how I feel. You are my mother. You raised me like I was your own son. And you know I’m grateful for that, right?” When I asked, you got so angry at me. But you were saving me from this heartbreak.

I fold the letter in half until the paper becomes too thick to fold. I put the paper in the palm of my hand and make a tight fist, squeezing it as hard as I can. “Grandma, what kind of person is my mother? Is she a bad person? And the next time I asked about my mom, you pointed at yourself with a smile and said, ‘Your mother was standing right in front of you.’ I thought you were keeping something from me, but I didn’t think much about it.

I don’t know what to do. What should I do? Should I read the letter? Should I read what my mom has to say? I unfold the letter until it’s only folded in thirds. I lay my back on the ground, holding the letter up toward the moonlight. I can barely see the scribbles of writing through the letter.

I take the portrait and flip it around to see Grandma’s face again. “Grandma? Please tell me, should I read this letter? And if I should, could you read it with me?”

Suddenly, my mind feels at ease. I’m calm. My hands aren’t shaking anymore. I sit up and put the lantern closer to me. I start to unfold the letter. I see the ink on the page.

To my beautiful baby boy,

I'm sorry if another letter feels pushy or gives the impression that I'm expecting something from you, but I want to let you know that I'm here. I don't know if you've read my first letter, but I need to write to you again because there is so much more I want to say. I know an apology isn't enough. Words can't erase the past 14 years I've been gone or undo the hurt I caused you. That's why I don't want to just apologize through a letter. I want to show you that I mean every word.

This is something I should have done a long time ago, but if you're willing, I'd love the chance to visit the island and see your face. I know that after all this time, the idea of meeting again might bring up pain, anger, or uncertainty. I don't expect it to be easy, and I don't expect you to welcome me with open arms. I only ask for the opportunity to see you, listen to you, and answer any questions you may have. As your mother, I feel that I have the responsibility to do this for you.

Tomorrow, Pastor Young-Hee will come to the island and ask if you'd like to see me. If you need more time to think, I will wait. Even if you only want to see me for a moment, even if all you want to say is everything you've kept inside for years—your anger, your pain—I will be there. I'll listen to whatever you have to say, and I will be grateful for it.

I don't know if I deserve this chance, but I hope with all my heart that you will consider it. No matter what you decide, please remember that I love you. I always have, and I always will. And please know that I'm sorry for everything. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.

*With all that I am,
Your mother*

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. The words linger in the cold air atop the mountain. As I reread Mom's letter, I can almost hear her voice, heavy with regret and guilt, just like mine. I'm sorry, Mom. I'm sad she is living a life desperately seeking forgiveness, constantly thinking about what she could have done, should have done, while someone she loved was still here. I understand. *I know how you feel, Mom. You and I are living the same life.*

I know she means every word in the letter, but still, she abandoned me. My own mother abandoned me. The thought lingers in my mind. I shine the light over Grandma's grave and place my hand on the stone. "Grandma? Do you think I should see my mother? Am I ready?" But I don't feel anything. I don't hear Grandma's words. I realize this is entirely up to me. Seeing my mother is something I have to want.

What will we talk about? What will she say?

The time to find out is here. I have the chance to learn more about who I am.

Drops of water dot the letter, and I look up at the sky. A drop lands on my nose. Beads of water scatter across the ground until the rain starts falling heavily. The ink on the letter begins to wash away, and I panic. The rain is ruining it. I want to keep reading. This letter is the only thing I have from Mom. I quickly shove it into my pocket and sprint down the mountainside, gripping the flashlight. I leave the empty bowls near Grandma's grave. I hate leaving a mess, but I have to save Mom's letter. I can get them tomorrow.

As I run down the hill, the rain lashes against me, soaking through my clothes. Water pools in my shoes, making each step heavier and more unsteady. My breath comes in ragged gasps, my chest burning as I push forward. I reach into my pocket, fingers fumbling for the letter. My hands are trembling, slick with rain. I pull it out just enough to see the ink bleeding into the paper, the words smudging into stripes.

“No, no, no—”

I try to shove it back into my pocket, but my fingers slip, the paper catching in the wind. My heart stops. I lunge for it, but the ground beneath me shifts. My foot lands wrong. I feel my ankle twist. Too far. A sharp, searing pain shoots up my leg as my balance breaks. My arms flail, grasping at nothing. Then, I'm falling.

The world spins in a blur of dark trees and streaks of rain. I slam against the muddy ground, my shoulder taking the first impact. Pain explodes through my arm, but there's no time to process it before I roll again, tumbling violently down the slope. Rocks tear at my skin. My head snaps backward as I hit something hard. A root? A rock? I don't know. A sharp, cracking sound fills my ears. My vision sparks. I land at the bottom of the mountainside with a thud.

For a moment, everything is silent except for the rain drumming against the earth. I try to move, but agony surges. My left leg screams in pain, the sharp kind that steals breath from my lungs. I clutch at it, but the moment my fingers brush against the bone, nausea churns in my stomach. Something is wrong. Very wrong.

I shift to push myself up, but as soon as I put weight on my right hand, another wave of pain rips through my wrist. It buckles, useless. A strangled cry escapes my throat. I bite down on my lip, hard, trying to hold in the scream, but it's too much. My body won't listen. I can't move.

The letter.

I shove my good hand into my pocket, my fingers searching desperately. Empty. My chest tightens. I turn my head, blinking through the rain and mud. It has to be here. Somewhere. A light flickers high up on the mountainside. The flashlight. My stomach sinks into the mud. I'm too far, too broken to climb back.

I squeeze my eyes shut as another wave of pain pulses through my body. My head spins, the world tilting sideways. My stomach clenches, and I barely turn my head before I vomit onto the wet ground. The taste of porridge burns my throat. The rain washes it away. I don't know if the water running down my face is rain or tears.

The pain is unbearable. It robs me of thought, of breath, of anything except its presence. I curl up as much as my broken body allows, pressing my forehead to the ground, gasping. The rain keeps falling. The world fades. Darkness creeps in, and it takes me in.

*****Chapter 8*****

A soft breeze brushes against my skin, pulling me from the heavy darkness. My eyelids twitch, then flutter open. Light floods my vision. Warm and blinding. I wince and instinctively raise my arm, shielding my face. Sunlight?

My breath catches as I blink rapidly, my mind scrambling to catch up. I'm not outside. I'm not in the rain. Slowly, I push myself up, but a sharp stiffness grips my neck, forcing me to move carefully. My head throbs, a pulsing pain behind my eyes.

I glance around. I'm in my bed. Home? How did I get here?

I shift under the blankets, my body sore. I look at my leg and wrist, both wrapped tightly in bandages, a wooden stick fastened to keep them still. Injured. Broken. The memories trickle in, the storm, the fall, the pain. I let my head sink back into the pillow, staring at the ceiling as I try to piece everything together.

"Ah, you're awake," a man's voice says.

I slowly turn toward the sound, my body stiff. "Pa...stor..."

He walks over and sits on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"What happened?" I ask, rubbing the bandage wrapped around my head. "The letter... I lost it."

"Don't worry about that right now," he says gently. "I came to the island to ask if you wanted to see your mother."

"When?"

"Yesterday. I couldn't find you at home, so I thought you might be at the fish market." He glances out the window. "You weren't there either, and I started to worry. I looked around your home and saw a trail leading into the mountains." His hand rests lightly on my shoulder. "That's where I found you, lying on the ground. You were badly injured. I called for help."

"I wish there was something I could do to thank you... but I have nothing."

"You don't have to worry about that." Pastor smiles. "All that matters is that you're safe."

"Thank you," I sigh.

He gently taps my shoulder in acknowledgment.

“How long was I asleep?”

Pastor exhales. “You were in and out of consciousness all day yesterday. You really weren’t in good shape. It seems like you don’t remember much. A ship is coming later today to take you to a proper facility for a full evaluation. But from what I understand, your injuries could have been much worse. You got lucky.”

He pauses, then looks at me carefully. “And you know... while we were carrying you out of the mountains, you were calling for your mother.”

I blink. “I did?”

He glances toward the door, then back at me. Footsteps sound outside. “I wasn’t sure if it was because of your injuries. Maybe you weren’t thinking clearly. But either way, there’s someone who’s been wanting to meet you for a very long time.”

He stands and walks toward the doorway. “I’ll give you two some time alone,” he says as he steps outside.

The sunlight stings my eyes as I squint toward the doorway. A person stands there, just a blur, against the bright light. As she steps closer, her figure sharpens. Bit by bit, her features come into focus. She moves carefully, almost hesitantly, her hands fidgeting at her sides before she folds them together. When she’s close enough, I see her face. She’s young, almost too young to be someone’s mother. She has a small face, big brown eyes, and thick black hair. I stare at her, searching. Then, in an instant, I see the resemblance. The curve of her nose, the shape of her mouth, the way her hands fidget just like mine when I’m nervous.

A tear slips down my cheek. My lips tremble. I breathe fast, and my nose starts to run. Before I completely break down, I force the words out, my voice barely above a whisper.

“M... Mom? You’re my mom...”

The woman drops to her knees beside the bed. She covers her face, her shoulders shaking as she sobs. She struggles to speak, choking on short, uneven breaths.

“Yes... yes, son. It’s me. I’m your mother.”

She reaches for my hand, holding it between hers as she cries. “You’re hurt,” she whispers.

Tears stream down my face, but suddenly, I yank my hand away from hers. My whole body trembles. “Why?” My voice comes out sharp, cutting through the air between us. “Why did you abandon me?”

Mom reaches toward my face, her fingers barely grazing my skin. “Son, I’m sorry. I’m a coward. I’m so sorry you have a mother like me.”

“I didn’t ask for an apology!” My voice rises. “What took you so long to see me?”

Mom lowers her head, pressing her forehead against the side of the bed, her hands gripping the sheets. Her sobs grow louder, broken.

I clench my fist. “If you can’t even tell your son why you left,” I spit through my teeth, “then just go. I can’t look at your face.”

Mom stands up and wipes her tears. She turns toward the door, her steps hesitant, defeated. Just before she steps out, she glances over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she says softly.

The door closes behind her. I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting, hoping to hear it open again. But the room stays silent. Mom doesn’t come back. A tear slips down my face. I made a mistake. I pushed my mother away. Each word that repeats in my head is unforgiving.

I wake up to the smell of cooked rice. I turn my head as much as I can toward the kitchen. Mom is ladling food into bowls and carefully arranging them on a tray. I try to sit up, but my body is too weak. She notices me struggling and rushes over, moving quickly but carefully, trying not to spill anything. The tray wobbles slightly in her hands as she slows down near the bed.

“You're awake.” Mom glances down at the food she prepared. “I made you something to eat.” Mom sets the tray on my lap and sits beside me, fidgeting with her hands.

I pick up the spoon and try to eat, but my unbroken hand is still weak. I scoop some porridge from the bowl, but it slips off the spoon before I can raise it to my mouth. Mom watches me as she eats. I can see it in her face. She wants to help, but she's indecisive.

Mom doesn't eat. Instead, she watches me, sneaking quick glances every time I struggle with the spoon. She's trying. I can see it in the way she prepared this meal, in the way she rushed to my side without hesitation. She doesn't know how to be my mother, but she's trying. And maybe... maybe I should let her.

I glance down at the tray, swallowing my pride.

“Uh, Mom?” I ask gently.

She perks up instantly, her eyes full of attention. “Yes? Do you need something?”

I hesitate, then exhale. “It's a bit hard to eat with the injuries.” I lower my gaze. “Can you help me?”

Mom quickly grabs the spoon and bowl of porridge. “Yes! Yes, of course!”

She scoops up a spoonful and carefully brings it to my lips. As I eat, I notice the corners of her mouth twitching like she's trying to hide a smile. She's happy. She doesn't say it, but I can feel it.

“Grandma used to make abalone porridge for me when I was sick,” Mom chuckles. “Do you like abalone porridge?”

I nod and smile. “This tastes great. Thank you.”

Mom brightens. “I also made some seaweed soup and barley tea. Do you like those too?” She gestures towards the tray.

“I’m not a picky eater. I’m grateful for anything.”

After eating, Mom gently wipes my mouth with a napkin before stacking the bowls. As she reaches for the tray, she pauses and looks into my eyes.

“What name did Grandma give you?” she asks softly.

“Oh, my name? It’s Hong Ha-Neul.”

Mom takes my hand, her thumb brushing lightly over my palm. “That’s a beautiful name. It means sky or heaven,” she murmurs, tracing letters on the back of my hand. “It suits you well.”

She stands and carries the tray toward the kitchen.

“Thank you for the food,” I blurt out before she leaves.

Mom stops and glances back at me. “You’re welcome.”

I watch Mom scrubbing the dishes in the kitchen, listening to the soft sounds of running water and dishes clinking. As I lie there, I realize she’s doing her best to show me she wants to be in my life. And yet, all I can think about is how I lashed out at her earlier. She was overwhelmed with emotion, and I only made it harder. I need to apologize.

Before I can rehearse what to say, the faucet shuts off. The door creaks open, and Mom takes a step out of the house. I don’t have time to overthink.

“Mom?” I call out.

Mom glances toward the door, uncertain, but she walks over and lowers herself onto the bed. “Do you need something?”

I sit up straighter. “I wanted to apologize for earlier. I know seeing me must be hard for you... all the emotions. I shouldn’t have reacted that way. I’m sorry.”

Mom laughs nervously. “It’s alright,” she says, staring at her feet. “I said I’d answer your questions.”

Her hands quiver slightly as she exhales. I notice how thin her fingers are, the way she presses them together like she’s trying to steady herself.

“After Dad died in the war, we had nothing. Mom took me to Jeju Island so she could dive for abalones again. It wasn’t much, but it kept us alive.”

She hesitates, rubbing her thumb over her sleeve. “She was hungry most days. But she made sure I ate. And when I couldn’t... she cried. Told me she was a terrible mother. I hated seeing her like that. People told her to send me to an orphanage, but she refused.”

I watch her neck tighten as she swallows hard.

“Then I saw women leaving with the soldiers stationed by the coast. They came back with money. A lot of it. And I thought... maybe I could help.”

Her voice cracks. I already know. She lowers her head, shoulders shaking. I pull her into my arms.

“It’s okay, Mom,” I whisper, rubbing her back.

She grabs my shirt. “I was just a kid. I didn’t know what I was doing. But I got pregnant. I... I had you.”

Tears spill down her face and my own vision blurs.

“I was your age,” she chokes. “I hid my pregnancy as long as I could, but when you were born... I panicked. Mom was barely surviving with me. I knew she couldn’t take care of you, too. So I...” She squeezes her eyes shut. “I put you in a plastic bag. I was going to throw you away.”

Her words crash down, forcing my neck to bend. I want to meet Mom's eyes, but the weight of her confession holds me down, unable to lift my head.

“You wouldn’t stop crying,” she whispers. “Mom caught me. She screamed at me. Said we’d figure it out. But I knew she couldn’t. So... I ran. And I never came back.”

Her fingers trace the side of my face, trembling. “I am so sorry, my son.”

I place my hand over hers.

“How did you survive?”

Mom wipes her face roughly. “I was homeless for months. Until Pastor Young-Hee found me. He took me to an orphanage. I stayed there until I turned eighteen. I got to go to school. Got a job. I planned to come back... but I was too ashamed. I convinced myself you were better off without me.”

I rest her head on my shoulder, pulling a blanket over her shaking body. She sobs, years of guilt spilling out all at once.

When the tears slow, I take a deep breath. “Mom... let’s go to the beach. Let’s watch the sunset.”

Both of us find strength. I push myself to my feet despite my injuries, and Mom helps me up. Together, we hop out of the house and make our way down the sandy shore. When we reach the beach, I drop to sit down, and Mom steadies my fall.

Mom and I stare at the ocean, where the sun meets the horizon. The sunlight reflects off the water, making it sparkle and shine. I let out a deep breath. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is." Mom looks up at me, her eyes still puffy and her face red. "Ha-Neul, do you forgive me? Can I be a part of your life?"

I place my hand on the small of her back. "I'm sorry, but I don't know if I can forgive you right now. It's a lot. This is the first time we've met. Is it fine if I take some time to think?"

Mom looks down at her feet. "Oh... I understand," she says quietly.

I kiss Mom on the cheek. "But that doesn't mean I don't want you to be part of my life. You know where I'll be. I'll stay here on the island. I still want to spend time with Grandma. I'll use the money you sent me to stay healthy. You'll always know where to find me. If I move away from the island, I'll let you know. In the meantime, come visit me. I want to spend more time with you. Maybe we can swim in the ocean or watch the stars by the creek. We can visit Grandma's grave together. I want to get to know you more. Can you do that for me, your son?"

Mom looks at me. There's sorrow in her eyes, but she smiles. "Yes. I can do that for my son. I'll always be here for my son."

I grab a handful of sand and raise it to my eyes. I slowly loosen my fingers and watch the sand slip through them, falling softly to the beach below. I take another handful and pour it onto Mom's lap.

She chuckles softly through her sniffing. "Hey, what are you doing?"

I don't respond. Instead, I scoop up more sand and pour it onto her lap again.

Mom playfully slaps my hand, brushing the sand off her lap. "Hey, stop that. It's going to get in my pants." Her bright laughter rings beautifully through the air, clear and free.

I keep pouring sand on her lap, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips. “When I was a baby, Grandma swaddled me in a warm towel. The sand... it sort of reminds me of that feeling. Protected. Loved.”

Mom picks up a handful of sand, her hands trembling slightly, and slowly lets it fall onto my lap. She watches the sand fall, like the hourglass of time between us, the moments slipping away too quickly. Her eyes meet mine.

The air is still and warm, the sound of the waves softly rolling onto the shore. The colors of the sky above us begin to shift. The sun is sinking lower, casting brilliant shades of gold and orange that spill across the sky like watercolor. The clouds catch the colors, turning from soft pinks to fiery reds, swirling in the evening light. The horizon glows, a final blaze of light before the day gives way to night.

We continue to pour sand on each other, the grainy texture reminding me of a time long ago when Grandma rowed back to shore with a smile. I can almost feel the warmth of her embrace, her arms around me, holding me close. And here, at this moment, with my head resting against Mom’s.

Mom and I both gaze out to the horizon, where the sky meets the sea, where the heavens stretch out endlessly. We look toward *ha-neul*. The light from the setting sun dances across the water, casting long shadows and turning the ocean into a mirror of fire. The world seems to pause for a moment, as if waiting for us.

In the distance, the last sliver of the sun dips below the water, leaving behind a soft pink glow that fades into the darkening sky. I close my eyes, letting the cool breeze sweep over my skin. Grandma’s smile lingers in my mind, a comforting presence, watching over us as we sit side by side, burying each other in the sand.